PENTECOST
May 23, 2010

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FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 104:24–34
Genesis 11:1–9
Acts 2:1–21

"How is it that we hear, each of us,
in our own native language?"
Acts 2:8 (NRSV)

Praise and glory to you,
creator Spirit of God. . . .
You come like the wind of heaven,
unseen, unbidden.
Like the dawn
you illuminate the world around us.
You grant us a new beginning every day.
You warm and comfort us.
You give us courage and fire and strength.
Be with us, Holy Spirit,
in all we say or think,
in all we do,
this and every day. Amen.

Prayer of Pentecost
The Book of Common Worship

It occurred to me this week that a church that is alive and well is always a church in transition, that change is not only unsettling but also an opportunity for new energy and new ideas and new imagination. We are in transition mode this morning. We are saying good-bye to a respected and beloved member of the church staff. Ali Trowbridge is changing vocational trajectories for the time being, from full-time clergyperson and mother to full-time mother, which is a bit of an understatement when you have three little ones to parent, including a four-month-old infant. Ali's recent responsibilities have been pastoral care and staff for our Board of Deacons. She has been our heart for six years, and we will miss her.

And we are ordaining and installing Deacons, Elders, and Trustees to office for three-year terms and saying thank-you to officers who have served faithfully and have completed their term.

And as Sara Pfaff so graciously acknowledged, Sue and I have decided on and announced a retirement date of January 31, 2012.

So this church this morning is not only a very lively and busy place, but it is also a church in transition. Not wanting to exaggerate the importance of any of these changes—including the process of searching for and choosing and calling a new pastor, which this church has done just four times in the past 100 years—it occurred to me that a church that is alive and well is always a church in transition and that change is not only occasionally unsettling but also an opportunity for creativity and new energy and new ideas and new imagination to take hold.

The time immediately ahead will be very important in the life of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago. We are undertaking the most ambitious project this church has ever undertaken since it decided to build this magnificent structure on an unpaved street beside Lake Michigan, a street that would become Michigan Avenue. The enterprise they began a century ago has prospered and succeeded beyond anything they imagined. The congregation is three times the size it was then, and its mission and ministry extend into the neighborhood, city, nation, and world. It is bursting the seams of the building they planned and built. So as they provided for the church in the twentieth century, we have the responsibility to provide for the twenty-first century. We are calling our undertaking Project Second Century, a project to build a new building adjacent to and behind this building that will reflect what we have become: a large church with many young adults, young families, many infants and children and young people. It will be a building that will allow us to care for the infants and nurture the children and welcome young people and feed the hungry and tutor youngsters and support the elderly and continue to expand and move boldly into the future.

We have important work to do, you and I, and I intend, in the months ahead, to do all I can to bring this project to a successful conclusion. And I ask for your support, your prayers, your presence on Sunday morning, which is such an important witness to the faith we share, and your gifts. This project will happen not because I’m working hard nor because there is a dedicated and wise group of church leaders overseeing it—which there is—nor because we have world-renowned architects drawing plans, which we do. Project Second Century will succeed because the members and friends of this historic church find their imagination stirred and their spirits lifted by what this new building will do—just as those courageous souls did 100 years ago—and make it happen by giving generously and sacrificially. Sue and I

believe so much in this project that we have made our pledge at a level that for us would have been unthinkable for most of our lives. And I ask you to join us in this project, the successful completion of which will outlive all of us and will keep this precious church here and strong and shining for another 100 years and beyond.

This morning is a snapshot of an extraordinary community of faith. But it occurred to me that from another angle of vision, a biblical angle, it is a snap hot of God's presence and activity in the world, which we call God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit, the active, sometimes powerful, sometimes subtle energy of God.

Pentecost is sometimes called the birthday of the church. The story actually begins centuries before, back on the very edge of recorded time, with an intriguing and mystical event, the story of the Tower of Babel, a story sometimes designated pre-history. The human community, created by God to live in peace and harmony with God and with one another, gathered together and decided to build a city and a tower that extends into the heavens. (I couldn't resist wondering whether they tried to sell their air rights and encountered their neighbor's opposition to the project . . . I digress). They wanted to make a name for themselves, but actually they wanted to avoid being dispersed. They were seeking security by building their city with high walls and their one and only culture—which they assumed was God's favorite culture—and their language, which they assumed was the language God spoke. Their goal was the security of sociological homogeneity: people like us, who look like us, whose skin is the same color as ours, who sing the same songs, eat and dress like us, and worship in the same way as we do—which we all know is God's way. It sounds cozy, comfortable, secure; life in a big gated community with our own kind, people just like us.

The surprise in this ancient story is that God wants nothing to do with it. God is not interested in racial and cultural homogeneity, security behind city walls, safe from intrusion and confrontation with the other, the stranger, the alien. God wants something like the opposite. So, of all things, God comes down and stirs the pot, confuses the language, causes people to speak different languages, and then scatters them all over the face of the earth. God loves diversity. God has in mind a creation full of difference and contrast: different languages, different races, different cultures and cultural institutions, and, yes, different religions.

Pentecost is the second chapter of this story. It has been seven weeks since Jesus was crucified. Some of his followers have begun to say that he was raised from the dead, was present with them. But nothing much has happened for seven weeks. Now it is Pentecost, one of the three major festivals in the Jewish calendar. Jews from all over the world are in

Jerusalem to celebrate the holiday and enjoy the feast. Everyone was there, from every place in the world, with their own dress and customs and their own language. The followers of Jesus were there too, celebrating the feast. Suddenly something happened that literally defied description. Later, when they remembered it, they said it was like a wind storm, almost like a hot fire. Followers of Jesus, whose native tongue was Aramaic and a little Greek, began to speak in the languages of all these foreigners. The sound of it must have been incredible, like an argument on a CTA bus between an Asian American, an Hispanic American, and an African American, with a white guy caught in the middle. It was such a bizarre clamor that bystanders thought they were all drunk—at 9:00 in the morning.

This story is often misrepresented as early Christians speaking in tongues, babbling incoherently, "glossolalia"—under power of the Spirit, a practice associated with Pentecostal churches. The point is exactly the opposite. They were speaking coherently—in different languages. People were hearing and understanding the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, in their own language. The miracle here is communication between diverse people, which is always a major miracle. I was at a dinner table recently with an Italian farmer, my age, and his son, a metal worker. We were guests in their home, and it was a wonderful occasion with much too much food and wine. Fortunately the wife of the iron worker spoke a little English, and their teenage daughter spoke a little bit more. The two of them facilitated communication around the table. When the women got up to clear the table, the men, I noted, didn't move; the three of us were sitting there together. My hosts assumed, I guess, that if they talked a lot and loudly, I'd understand. So there was a stream of Italian with accompanying hand gestures and the inflection, and of course, I didn't understand a word they were saying. I kept saying, "Si, si," and they kept right on. Communication was limited to smiles, pats on the arm, and clinking glasses—"chin, chin"—until gratefully Silvana and Vanessa reappeared. Communication is always something of a miracle.

So the message of Pentecost is that the Creator intends and likes diversity, but the Spirit of the Creator, the Holy Spirit, enables communication to happen in spite of diversity, without destroying the diversity. God intends different languages, cultures, races, and religions.

You simply cannot read these stories and not think about what is happening in our own culture and nation. You cannot know about the Spirit of God at Pentecost and not be uncomfortable with a political effort to enforce use of one language, English, with people whose birth language, native, cultural language, is Spanish. Of course everybody needs to be able to read road signs and instructions on the prescription bottle. But people who know about Pentecost ought to be cautious and uncomfortable about the

theological implications of insisting that there is only one legitimate language spoken here.

And Christians who know about Pentecost ought to be very uncomfortable about the implications of trying to resolve the serious matter of unregulated porous national borders and undocumented immigrants by rounding them up and sending them home. There are, after all, clear biblical mandates about welcoming the stranger, providing for the alien. Many of them come here out of appalling poverty and hopelessness. They come out of desperation, for noble reasons: to provide for their families and to provide a better life for their children. They find jobs and work hard and do jobs no one else wants to do. They pay taxes and obey the law significantly more consistently than their American neighbors do. A recent study revealed that the crime rate in the immigrant community in Arizona, even the undocumented community, is significantly lower than in the Anglo community. Surely there is a bipartisan way to acknowledge and legitimize their presence and to offer some kind of commonsense resolution to the whole matter without ripping apart families and jailing and deporting. To his credit, President Bush, with experience and understanding of the issue as Governor of Texas, tried to address the issue compassionately and justly, but the effort failed. It is time to get the job done—to find a way to establish and administer secure national borders and at the same time to deal with people who come here to work and find a better life—without becoming a police state in which people who look and talk differently are regarded as threats and are unwelcome. It is not merely a matter of political justice for us. It's spiritual, religious, theological, because of our basic religious values and commitments and the story of the Spirit of God at work in the world.

There is a lot I love about my country. Near the top of the list is our national motto—E Pluribus Unum, "out of many, one"—and that great symbol of the motto, that beautiful statue that stands in the New York harbor with the words "Give me your tired, your poor." When I return to Chicago after being out of the country, the first thing that strikes me is how amazingly diverse the city is, what an incredibly rich mix of languages, dress, food, culture, and religions it has. It is the American genius—E Pluribus Unum—and I like to think it reflects something of the vision of Pentecost and the will of God.

Walter Brueggemann wrote recently that Pentecost is not just a remembered event but an ongoing process by which the Spirit (of God) regularly rattles, bewilders, and turns the world upside down (*Journal for Preachers,* Pentecost 2010). And, I would add, it is the promise that God never abandons this world, never abandons the church or you or me, for that matter; the promise that the Spirit of God will continue to stir and energize imagination and faith and hope; a promise I invite you to take seriously as together, as a church, we face the future, with its challenge and its hope and great promise.

I invite you to trust this God who promises to be present in the world, in the church, in your personal life. That's my plan for the next twenty months and beyond that, and I invite you to join me.

The traditional symbol of the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, is a dove, a descending dove coming into the world with the blessing and promise of God. Theologians of the Celtic church, however, suggest that a dove is too gentle, that the Spirit of God is lively, energetic, powerful, stirs things up, changes things, enables something new to happen, and so not a dove but a wild goose is a more appropriate symbol of the Holy Spirit.

Whichever, the promise of Pentecost is that God will continue to fire the imagination of the church, to stir it up and give it impatience and power and energy for the work it is called to do. And it is the promise that you and I can trust that lively presence in our own lives.

There is an old Appalachian folk song with a haunting tune that I have always loved, have a sense that I will be humming it and singing it in my heart a lot over the coming months, and I commend it to you.

> The lone, wild bird in lofty flight,
> Is still with Thee, nor leaves thy sight.
>
> The ends of the earth are in Thy hand
> The sea's dark deep and far-off land.
>
> And I am Thine!
> I rest in Thee.
> Great Spirit, come,
> and rest in me.

Amen.